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South Pass Tales

~Adventures in the Past~

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South Pass--gateway to the West

One of the truly great discoveries of the American west was the route through South Pass. Known and used by fur trappers in the early part of the 19th Century, South Pass later became a major landmark for travelers on the Oregon/California/Mormon Trails.

South Pass was discovered in 1812 by a small party of Astorians led by Robert Stuart as they traveled east with dispatches for John Jacob Astor. It was "rediscovered" in 1824 by a party of trappers led by Jedediah Smith as they searched for a winter crossing through the Wind River Mountain Range. William Sublette led a small caravan of wagons to South Pass in 1828. While the party did not take the wagons over the pass, they proved that wagon travel was possible.

Captain Benjamin Bonneville took the first wagons over South Pass into the Green River Basin in 1832. However, it was Lt. John Charles Fremont who would be credited with widely publicizing the route over South Pass as a result of his expedition in 1842. Scattered references to the easy passage over the Rocky Mountains had appeared in various newspapers for a decade, but Fremont ignited enthusiam for South Pass by explaining that a traveler could go through the pass without any "toilsome ascents."

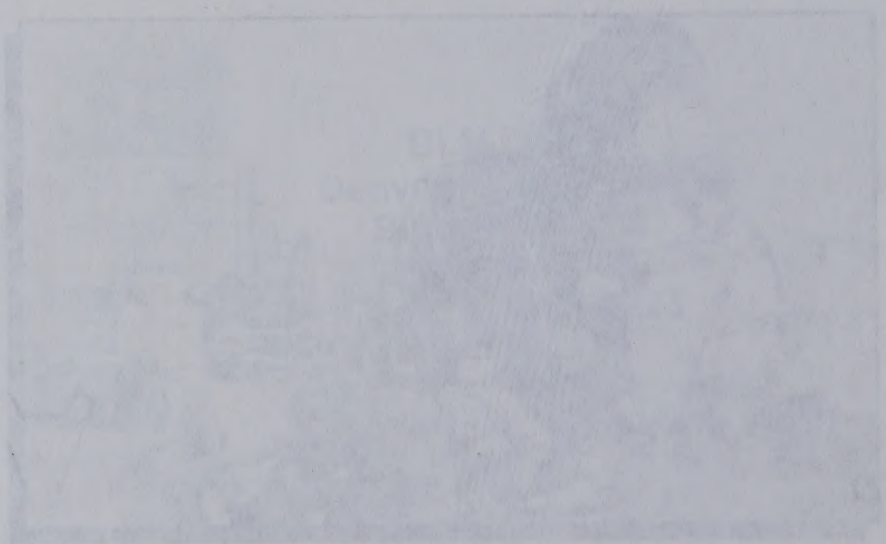
When the news about the pass spread in the eastern United States, the great migration west began. Hundreds of thousands of people headed for Oregon, California, and Utah would use the trail through South Pass in the following 20 years.

For every person traveling the route, there's a separate story of adventure, discovery, and hardship. In the style of the times, many travelers kept a daily record of their experiences. These journals give us a fascinating insight into what life was like on the trail.

As an example, Margaret A. Frink was headed for California and recorded in her diary on Monday, June 24, 1850 that , *"...We traveled up a long, gradual slope, or plain, free of rocks, trees, or gullies, and came at half past eleven o'clock to the summit of the South Pass of the Rocky Mountains. We could hardly realize that we were crossing the great backbone of the North American Continent... The ascent was so smooth and gentle, and the level ground at the summit so much like a prairie region, that it was not easy to tell when we had reached the exact line of the divide. But it is here after every shower the little rivulets separate, some to flow into the Atlantic and the others into the Pacific."*

Frink's journal entry for the day continued, *"...Near the summit, on each side of the road, ws an encampment, at one of which the American flag was flying... To see the old flag once more strongly reminded us of home. There was a hailstorm at noon, but that did not prevent the assembled company from having an off-hand celebration of our arrival at the summit. Music from a violin with tin-pan accompaniment, contributed to the general merriment of a grand frolic."*

Nearly every emigrant journal records traversing South Pass. Though the road ahead was still long and hard, crossing the Continental Divide was a "victory" and cause for celebration.



Jedediah Smith, a bear and South Pass

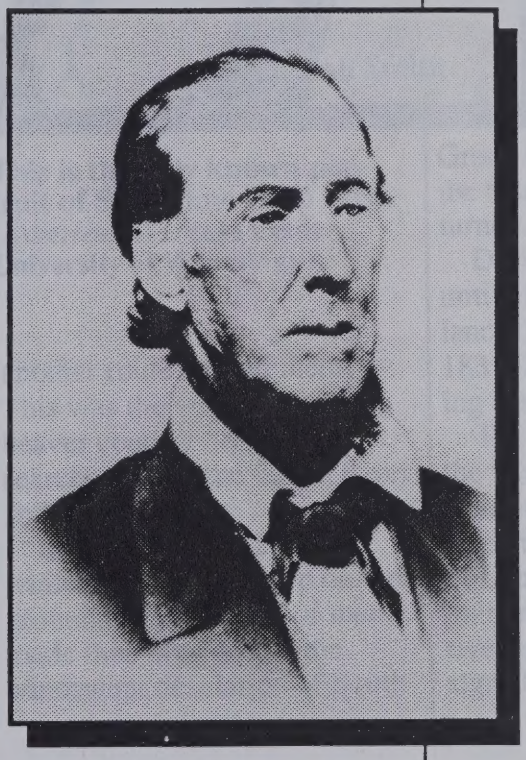
> •To Enterprising Young Men•
> The subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two, or three years - For particulars, enquire of Major Andrew Henry, near the Lead Mines, in the County of Washington, (who will ascend with, and command the party) or to the subscriber at St. Louis.
>
> Wm. H. Ashley
> February 13, 1822

William Ashley's advertisement in the Missouri Gazette & Public Advertiser added to a chain of events which is part of the fabric of Wyoming and the heritage of the Sweetwater country. The ad also caught the eye of one young man in particular, Jedediah Strong Smith. Whether Smith actually saw the ad and acted upon it, or whether he was on his way to St. Louis intent on entering the fur trade anyway, is a moot point. The end result was that he joined Ashley's party and headed west.

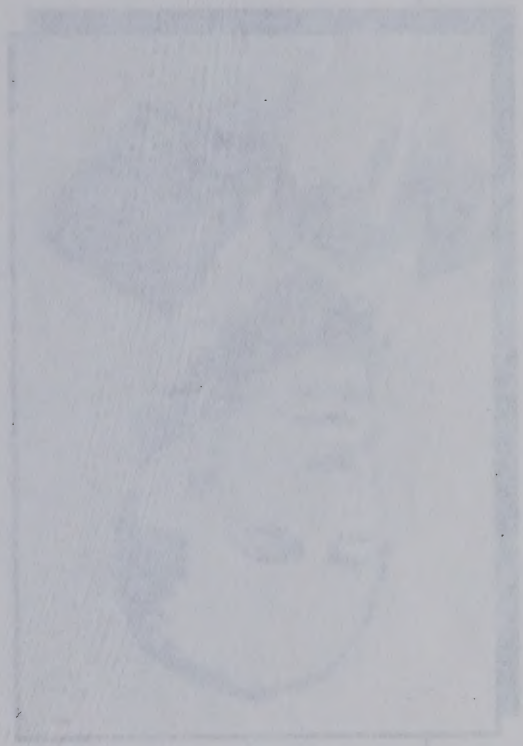
Jedediah's actions, demeanor, and abilities quickly brought him to the forefront as a leader amongst the rough and tumble crowd, later known as mountain men. Though he lived a short life, even by fur-trade standards, his achievements have filled history books.

In the fall of 1823, Smith led a small company of men in search of new beaver territory, supposedly south of the Yellowstone River. In September 1823, they left the Missouri River at Fort Kiowa and pushed west across South Dakota. Somewhere near the present-day Wyoming border between the Black Hills and the Powder River Basin, disaster struck in the form of a giant grizzly bear. The bear attacked Jedediah and left him torn and bleeding on the ground.

James Clyman, a young man at the time but destined to be one of the mountain man "greats", described what happened next, *"...None of us having any surgical Knowledge what was to be done ... I asked the Capt [Smith himself] what was best he said one or 2 [go] for water and if you have a needle and thread git it out and sew up my wounds around my head which was bleeding freely I got a pair of scissors and cut off his hair and then began my first Job of d[r]essing wounds ... the bear had taken nearly all his head in capacious mouth close to his left eye on one side and close to his right ear on the other and laid the skull bare to near the crown of his head ... one of his ears was torn from his head out to the outer rim after stitching all the other wounds in the best way I was capabl and according to the captains directions the ear being the last I told him I could no nothing for his Eare O you must try to stich up some way or other said he then I put in my needle stiching it through and through and over and over laying the lacerated parts togather as nice as I could with my hands ... this gave us a lisson on the charcter of the grissly Baare which we did not forget."*

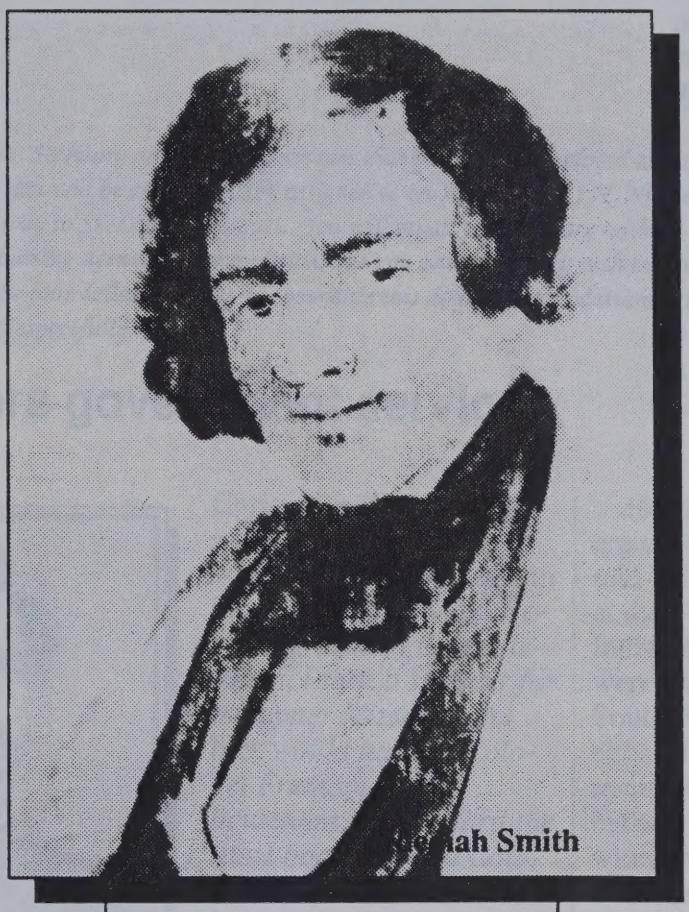


Until the end of his life, Smith wore his hair long to cover up the bear damage - long scars and a misfigured ear. September 1823, must have been either a good month for grizzlies or a bad one for mountain men, for it was during that same month that Hugh Glass was attacked by a



grizzly and left for dead by his companions. He then made his epic trip for survival, alone in a hostile wilderness.

Jedediah Smith was tough, and in just a few days after the grizzly attack the group resumed their search for new beaver territory. Near the present town of DuBois, Wyoming the party wintered with Crow Indians. There, an Indian chief told of a way through the Wind River Mountains. Charles Keemle later described what they had been told, *"that a pass existed in the Wind river mountains, through which he could easily take his whole band upon streams on the other side. He also represented beaver so abundant upon these rivers that traps were unnecessary to catch them-they could club as many as they desired."* That route, Union Pass, had too much snow to permit travel across the range. Later, acccording to Clyman, in another attempt to communicate with the Crows, sand was strewn on a buffalo robe and a map was drawn in the sand showing the Wind River Mountains and the location of another route around them. This was the way to the rich beaver country Smith was searching for... the Green River and its tributaries.



This is the only known portrait of Smith known to exist. (American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming)

In late March 1824, with winter's snow still deep on the ground, Smith's band of men made their way across the windswept desolation of South Pass and camped in the sagebrush, dining on a freshly killed buffalo. The next night they camped on the Big Sandy - cold, tired, and hungry. Trying to chop a hole in the ice so that the men and horses could get a drink was taking too long, so Clyman took his gun and blasted a hole through with a bullet. They had successfully crossed the Continental Divide where thousands of wagons would follow in succeeding decades. A few days later, the party reached the banks of the Green River and a new page in the history of the fur trade was turned.

During the next seven years until his death at the hands (and lances) of Comanches in May 1831, Smith continued exploring the West.

The South Pass site where the Oregon Trail crosses the Continental Divide is on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Stone markers and a BLM interpretive sign commemorate the significance of the site.

Bureau of Topogrl Engrs
Washington
April 16th 1838.

Sir:

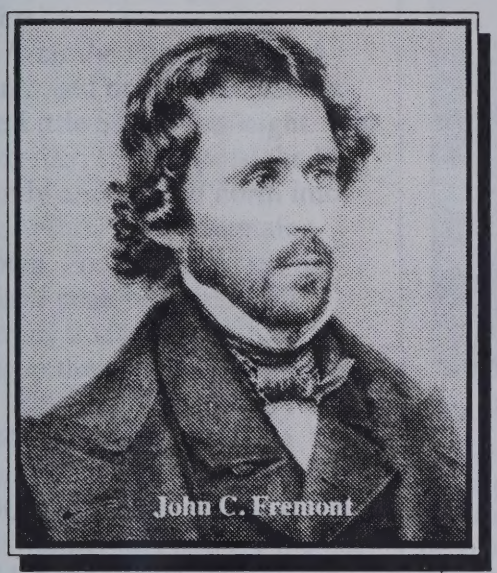
I am authorized by the Hon. Secretary of War to inform you that you will be employed as a Civil Engineer under the law of 30th April 1824, and that you will be and are hereby assigned as an Assistant to J.N. Nicolet, Esqure.

Mr. Nicolet is now on his way to St. Louis, Missouri. You will repair to that place without delay and report to him for orders. ... you will act as disbursing agent to the expedition, but you will make only such expenditures as he shall authorize.

...Your compensation will be four dollars per day, to commence this day, with an additional allowance to ten cents per mile for your traveling expenses. Respectfully,

J..J. Abert.
Lt.Cl.T.Eng.

Fremont enters government service


John C. Fremont

With this letter from the Chief of the Bureau of Topographical Engineers, John C. Fremont entered government service as a scientist/engineer and explorer. It was the start of a career which was to capture the imagination and support of the nation. In the 1840's, Fremont led four government-sponsored expeditions to the West. The first of those trips in 1842 brought him to the Sweetwater country in southwest Wyoming.

While organizing his first expedition, Fremont was trying to track down and hire Captain Andrew Drips as the expedition guide. On his way to meet Drips, though, Fremont met Christoper "Kit" Carson and hired him instead.

Carson recorded later in his autobiography, *"...Becoming tired of the settlements, I took a steamer for the upper Missouri. As luck would have it, Colonel Fremont, then a lieutenant, was aboard the same boat. ... I told Colonel Fremont that I had been some time in the mountains and thought I could guide him to any point he would wish to go. He replied that he would make inquiry regarding my qualifications for the task. I presume the reports he received were favorable, for he told me he would engage me, paying me one hundred dollars per month. I accepted the offer and prepared to accompany him. His object was to survey the South Pass, and measure the highest peaks of the Rocky Mountains."*

The meeting and subsequent relationship between Fremont and Carson was to prove beneficial to both of them. In Carson, Fremont found an unparalled guide to the largely uncharted West; in Fremont, Carson gained a p.r. man, for it was only after Fremont publicized him that Carson became famous.

Heading west, Fremont and crew reached Fort Laramie in mid-July 1842. While camped at the Fort they heard of serious Indian trouble in the area and were warned not to continue to South Pass. As one story goes, either through mischief or malice Carson wrote and signed his will before continuing which made everyone else extremely nervous. Fremont was forced to give a pep talk about continuing with bravery or turning back in cowardice. The net result was one man refused to go on and the rest of the party left on July 21st.

Making their way up the Sweetwater River, they crossed South Pass on August 7th. In Fremont's report of the expedition, which was ably edited and polished by his wife Jessie Benton Fremont, he described the terrain, *"...The ascent had been so gradual that, with all the intimate knowledge possessed by Carson, who had made this country his home for seventeen years, we were obliged to watch very closely to find the place at which we had reached the culminating point. This was between two low hills, rising on either hand fifty or sixty feet. ... I should compare the elevation which we sur-*

mounted at the pass, to the ascent of the Capitol hill from the avenue, at Washington. ... and the traveller, without being reminded of any change by toilsome ascents, suddenly finds himself on the waters which flow to the Pacific ocean." Mixed in with a national "Oregon Fever," "Manifest Destiny," and a lingering suspicion of British motives - these words helped encourage a rising flood of emigrants to make the decision to head West.

After the Pass, the group continued on and camped on the Little Sandy that night. The next day, they crossed the Big Sandy and headed north into the Wind River mountains. There, Fremont climbed the tallest peak he could find, named it after himself, and began the return journey home.

The financial records for the 1842 expedition shows a voucher paid to Kit Carson for $300.00 for services as guide and hunter and $40 for the use of 1 mule. Fremont's own voucher shows that his salary had gone up to $8.00 a day salary plus expenses.

Fremont was back in the area 2 years later while returning east from his expedition to Oregon and California of 1843-44. Guided by Carson again, Fremont came across the Uinta Mountains via Antoine Robidoux's fort (which burned to the ground just a few weeks later) and arrived in Brown's Hole in early June, 1844. His expedition report records the site of Fort Davy Crockett in Brown's Hole on the banks of the Green River near the mouth of Vermillion Creek. His 1844 notes about Fort Davy Crockett was the last written description until the site was rediscovered by National Park Ranger Glade Ross in 1976.

In addition to helping "open" the West through his explorations, Fremont's extensive writings, maps, and observations served as a starting point for scientific work for over a 100 years.

Camping at Pacific Springs

Typically, the first campsite for travelers on the Oregon Trail after they crossed South Pass was Pacific Springs. The Springs were the first source of water and the broad area at the foot of the gradual decline from South Pass provided a good campsite for emigrant wagons and accompanying livestock. For those reasons, nearly every emigrant journal of the period describes stopping there for the night.

Granite markers at South Pass summit

Even though there were hundreds of miles of rough trail ahead, Pacific Springs was a "mental" landmark because from here, the water flowed towards the Pacific Ocean via the Green River system and eventually the Colorado River. In some cases, it was just enough to keep them going. Although John C. Fremont had been to California several times during the 1840's and was familiar with the Great Basin of Utah and Nevada, the overall "picture" of water drainage in the West was not widely understood. In fact, many travelers along the trail thought that the Green River and the fabled "Rio Buenoventura" were two different streams. In 1849, one party led by William Manly even tried floating the Green River as a "shortcut" to California.

One of the more poignant descriptions of the area is found in a letter written by Lucy Rutledge Cooke to her sister in July 1852. Lucy wrote *"...This morn we arrived at South Pass after which all water we see will be running to the Pacific. So we are now on the other side of the world and about 4000 (sic) feet above the ocean... (Sunday) Today we drove a short distance to a better camping place but still there's poor grass except what is in swampy ground..."*

Another interesting account of the Pacific Springs area was recorded by twin sisters on their way to Oregon with their husbands. Cecelia Adams and Parthenia Blank were 23 years old when they made the journey in 1852.

Parthenia's entry in their journal for Sunday, August 1, says *"...From the summit (South Pass) we proceeded down a gentle slope to the Pacific Spring and creek 3 miles and encamped for the night. Here we could find no grass except on a deep slough formed by the springs covered with turf and grass on which a man can stand and shake the ground for several feet around him it is so soft underneath. Upon this we put our cattle to feed for it was the only chance and the sod was so tough they did not break through a great deal. The Pacific Springs rises in the middle of this boiling up through the sod as cold as ice itself - made 13 miles..."*

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